

# Rains Retreat Observance and the Kaṭhina Ceremony of the Buddhists

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The Rains Retreat Observance of the Buddhist Sangha known as the Vassā Vāsa everywhere in the Buddhist world is normally terminated with the Mahā Pavāraṇā or the Great Confession on the Full Moon day of the third month of the season. This year it falls on 28th October 2007. This is followed by the Grand Ceremony of the Offering of the Kaṭhina Robe to the Vassa-observing-monks at their residence on any agreed-upon and specified day up to the day of the next full moon.

Vassa-Observance is an age-old custom in the Buddha Sāsana, dating back to the time of the Buddha himself, primarily respecting Nature's new growth pattern of plant life on the advent of the rainy season in India during Vassāna. During this season, all senior, i.e. *upasampanna* Buddhist monks are expected to remain within their resident monasteries, living out of them being allowed only up to a maximum of six days at a time. This rule should not be interpreted as permitting a Vassa-observing monk to stay away from his Vassa-residence for six days and return only for one single day's residence on the seventh day. During this period, the monks are expected to endeavour to achieve greater purity and perfection in their monastic lives, avoiding all lapses in discipline.

The institution of the Great Confession or the Mahā Pavāraṇā highlights this. On the full moon day of the third month, all monks who have been living the Vassāna together shall meet in one place. The senior-most monk among them shall squat at the head of the gathering and call upon the entire membership of the Sangha to indicate to him any mistake of his, seen, heard of or suspected by them, promising to correct it if it is found to be truly so. Every member of the congregation shall in turn call upon the Sangha in this manner.

In the early history of the Sāsana, this checking on the purity of the life of the Sangha in terms of the Vinaya rules laid down in the Pātimokkha was carried out regularly during its recital called the Pātimokkha-*uddesa*, carried out on a fortnightly basis. During this ritual, any monk who was guilty of any breach of the Pātimokkha rules had to confess his offence and face the consequence of being put accordingly under penalties and punishments. But whether one calls this a natural process of decay or one of tragic decadence through neglect, in many areas of Theravada monastic institutions this essentially vibrant ritual of the Pātimokkha recital has turned out to be a limbo of the forgotten past. Even Vinaya books of a later period choose to call it only an occasion for formal gathering of the Sangha for purposes of unity building among them, referring to it as *uposatho samaggattho* [Vinaya Vinicchaya]. The Pavāranā referred to above which takes place only annually at the end of the Vassāna has turned out to be the only purification ritual of the Buddhist Sangha: *visuddhatthā pavāraṇā*. Be that what it may. We would leave it with the hope that Theravāda Buddhist monks all over the world would be ardent in their pursuit of the Nibbanic goal and live diligently for its assured attainment.

As for the lay householders, let us express one sincere wish that they religiously utilize the Vassana Season for their maximum spiritual development. For them, these three months should be none other than a season of relaxed religious cultural growth. They should also as Buddhists strive and get the courage needed to challenge and fight to alter the vicious contemporary round-the-clock work ethic which the state, their work places and the patterns of their contemporary social set-up impose upon them, compelling them to forget all other considerations like their personal religious culture, moral goodness in society, family harmony and child care, all of which seriously need to be retrieved today for our own survival, if for none other. The net result of this gross neglect is the violence and bullying which is raging in our midst today, toppling over even the saner and much more the less saner people in in our society. Let all our ritualistic religious activities promote not only our wished-for success in this short-

lived life here but contribute to our final bliss of Nibbāna.